

## **The Liberating Power of Love**

### **By Shannon Anderson**

I have to admit I was a bit intimidated by this month's theme. Love, sure, that I could do. But love so heartfelt and amazing it becomes liberating? Phew. That's a tall order. Then I thought, oh, thank goodness - saved by the holidays! So, we spent the first two weeks of the month discovering love inspired by new year's wishes and hopes that liberate us from what has been holding us back and the liberating love of a civil rights icon. Who can get more liberating in love than Martin Luther King Jr? The man has streets named after him and his legacy of love and community lingers on today interspersed with the lessons of history he inspires us to never forget - and hopefully, never repeat.

But, now it is back to my turn. So here I go. Spending a morning sitting at my computer looking out my backyard home office window, I wondered what could I possibly share with you about love so miraculous it becomes liberating? I recently participated in an implicit bias training with the Wyoming Education Association as part of our Equality State Policy Center Board of Directors' commitment to learning and sharing lessons of justice, equity, diversity and inclusion. As part of the training, everyone has to share a bias that they often experience from others, juxtaposed by how we really are. Biases, both implicit and explicit, are all around us, garnered by culture, tradition, religion, and as MLK would say, unbeloved community. So, when it got to my turn, I shared that I live alone as a single woman without kids. This means people often assume I am lonely and without love in my life, but that is not the case. I am not lonely as my days are filled, both professionally and personally with friends, nature, my mom, other family, and of course my very grumpy but loving companion Scooby the terrier. I am not without love because of these people and forces in my life that I love, but also because I love myself and have a heart full for the world, humanity, and our web of community.

Society tells us that to be happy - to truly be liberated by love - you need a life partner, preferably one of an opposite biological gender, and a couple of kids that you can raise in your likeness. But that's not in the cards for everyone. Nor should it be. As our Story for All Ages demonstrated, not everyone needs a Mom to bring to a Mother's Day party to have a family full of love. And not everyone needs a child or children to find love as a family. At my last college reunion in 2022, I was having a meal with a lesbian couple I went to college with and we were discussing the fates of some of our other classmates and one remarked, quite forcefully, that birthing a child is a selfish act. For a moment I was taken aback, thinking of all of the cute kiddos I know and not for a moment wishing any of them weren't around, but then she explained that with the world's overpopulation and all of humanity's issues, it is less selfish to adopt or go

without children. I suppose I could see that zero population growth perspective of limited resources and environmental sustainability. As someone who has never wanted to have a biological child, I did in my mid-30s consider adoption, quite seriously for a time, but ultimately decided against it for a combination of monetary and personal lifestyle reasons. However, this is not to say that having biological kids is the wrong - or immoral or selfish - choice for anyone. But it should be a choice, and unfortunately the biases in our society do not always honor someone's choice of whether to bear or beget a child.

And even more unfortunate is the situation where a child is raised in a home without love, or at least when there is love that is debilitating not liberating - the kind of home where social workers have to get involved, and kids often have to be separated from their mom or dad or both.

This is all to say our assumptions of what makes love in a family often are based on the implicit biases we gather from Valentine's Day cards, tv commercials, top 40 love songs, or perhaps Hallmark movies. (As a side note, truth be told I am a big hallmark movie fan, after all, who doesn't love a guaranteed happy ending?). But more than ever, some of these influences, yes even hallmark movies, are doing more to include the diversity of love stories within our society. More and more, even mainstream society is recognizing that for love to be liberating not just for ourselves, but for us to understand how it is liberating for others, we must open our hearts bigger and allow our minds to be free and clear – liberated so to speak - to eliminate any biases, implicit or explicit, we may hold about other people, families, and relationships.

Reverend Randy Partain of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Cleveland defines love in his essay *Ruminations: Liberating Love* as “active commitment to the well-being of another.” He explains that love is central to our UU spiritual covenant, and in fact, as Victor shared with us last year, the UUA has proposed to add to its Article II purposes a statement that “We will transform the world by our liberating love” and that “Love inspires and powers the passion with which we embody our values.” In this new covenant of purpose, love is placed in the center of all of our other values. In doing so, we are saying that without love, those other values of justice, equity, and generosity, cannot be liberated or activated. In other words, love is not only a value in and of itself, but a central element of how we move forward to display and act upon other values central to our UU spirituality. As the statement says, this love that liberates and frees us to be our best selves is so powerful that it allows us to both individually and collectively transform the world.

Whoa, transforming the world? That's another tall order. But, even if the world in that statement is limited to your own personal one and the circle of people, nature, and things you interact with on a daily basis rather than the world at large, liberating love can certainly be transformative. As the name suggests, it liberates you from the negative stuff that brings you down and keeps you focused on moving forward, hopefully bringing others along with you in the journey. Like the bad stuff from 2023 we

burned up in our fire communion ceremony, let love keep burning up the things that hold you back. Let love liberate you from regret, from sorrow, from debilitating emotional pain, anxiety, stress, jealousy or judgment, or from fear.

This is not to say that we won't continue to keep experiencing those emotions. We are only humans living in this messy world of ours after all. Nor is it to say that those emotions are unhealthy. Sometimes, we need to feel sorrow and regret to realize our values of compassion and understanding. But, when we act from a place of liberating love, we are able to move forward in spite of those other emotions, and hopefully help those we love do the same.

I will leave you with the words of Reverend Tess Baumberger and her poem Love and Justice:

Love is kind with people but impatient with injustice.  
Love is assertive and respectful.  
Love listens to the anger of those who experience oppression  
Without responding, without defending,  
Without interrupting, without explaining.  
It listens with compassion, seeking always to understand.

Love is slow to anger, especially at the start or end of life,  
and with anyone who the world discounts.  
Yet anger can be a part of love.  
Consider the force with which parents defend their young.  
Love fears for those it loves, for what it loves.  
When who or what it loves cannot defend itself,  
Love rises to defend.  
When those it loves have the power of defense  
It takes their lead with humility and courage.  
Love assists, empowers, and frees.  
Love's anger rises to meet injustice  
In considered ways that help correct it.

Love is willing to examine itself,  
Its thoughts, actions, and unmeditated bias.  
It recognizes one's power to harm, or to be part of systems of harm  
With or without awareness, but once aware it can only intend  
To make amends, to right the wrongs, to change the systems  
That legislate hatred.  
Love is willing always to change,  
Always to learn, always to heal.  
Love rejoices in truth and in equity.  
There is no limit to love's steady presence,  
Or it's holding us, gently but insistently, to what is right.